

In what may be a preview of internal clashes to come, conservatives are pushing House Minority Leader John A. Boehner to change the way he handles his job.

The Republican Study Committee (RSC), the largest House GOP faction, wants Boehner to start basing strategy decisions on formal votes of the entire caucus — in effect, turning control of minority party strategy over to the rank and file.

RSC members argue that in the face of three special-election losses, internal votes to decide caucus direction would provide a needed jolt of energy.

Senior GOP lawmakers, aides and lobbyists on K Street say the RSC's demands will be tested in the near future in a showdown meeting of the full GOP Conference.

The meeting is being held at the request of more than 50 House Republicans.

Jeb Hensarling of Texas, the RSC's soft-spoken chairman, said the group's goal is not to embarrass Boehner, R-Ohio, but to steer the caucus in a more conservative direction.

"We must be true to our conservative roots and principles," Hensarling said. "We've got to be bigger and bolder in order to let American people know the difference between the parties."

Collateral Impact

A collateral impact of the RSC's effort may be to sway rank-and-file Republicans to start thinking about whether their leadership team needs to be changed.

An RSC member predicted that after the November election, a number of conservatives will run for leadership slots. "We're going to see competition across the board," he said.

Boehner declined to discuss the RSC insurrection and its impact on his management style.

Other senior Republicans attacked efforts to introduce caucuswide votes as a tool for reshaping the agenda going into the election. "Look, we have enough tough votes every two years in leadership races. . . . More votes might push people out of the party," said Darrell Issa, R-Calif.

"I'm not sure we need to have votes every time there is a new proposal. Such votes have been rare in the past," said Adam H. Putnam of Florida, chairman of the House Republican Conference.

Putnam said the caucus had voted only once in the 110th Congress to choose its direction, and that was to oppose a bipartisan Senate immigration overhaul (S 2205).

A senior House Republican said Boehner was likely to meet Hensarling halfway.

When the caucus meets this week, that Republican said, Boehner will unveil an economic agenda that incorporates some RSC priorities, such as extensions of GOP tax cuts and, possibly, a constitutional amendment to limit the growth of federal spending.

What's unclear is whether that would be enough to mollify the RSC.

If Boehner is able to thwart the push for issue-by-issue caucus votes, his hand will be strengthened for the next challenge from the RSC, whether on a policy direction or on keeping his leadership job.

At the heart of the coming drama is a dispute over leadership style.

In addition to trying to push the GOP to the right, the RSC favors a more daring leadership approach that takes a hard line against Democrats on the floor.

Boehner has a more cautious style that may be rooted in the aftermath of the 1998 election, when the GOP lost seats. Boehner was ousted as conference chairman and former Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga. (1979-1999), was deposed.

A decade later, Boehner has a consensus-driven approach to leadership resembling that of former Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (1987-2007), who vowed to please “the majority of the majority.”

“Leaders should be willing to make decisions based on a variety of factors like polling, rather than just waiting for consensus among lawmakers,” said John Campbell, R-Calif.

Divided Over Earmarks

One of the biggest points of contention between the RSC and the Republican leadership is what to do about earmarks.

Lawmakers close to Boehner say the leader opposes earmarks but will not impose Hensarling's signature call for a GOP earmark moratorium.

“What would you do to someone who violated that ban — take them out and shoot them?” said one senior lawmaker who is a Boehner ally.

The RSC's push for the caucus to take an anti-earmark position would help Republican presidential aspirant John McCain and highlight a difference with Democrats.

But should McCain win the November election, votes of the House GOP Conference also could be used to fire shots across his bow on issues such as climate change and ending the ban on broader embryonic stem cell research — issues on which RSC members tend to disagree with McCain.

“We could see votes in the caucus on issues where there is disagreement, if McCain is in the White House,” said Scott Garrett, R-N.J.

Garrett explained that some House Republicans who went along with President Bush out of party loyalty have “buyer’s remorse” over the 2003 prescription drug benefit (PL 108-173) and the 2001 No Child Left Behind education law (PL 107-110).

“We want House Republicans to have their own agenda. And we want to have separation,” said Tennessee’s Marsha Blackburn.

Mark Steven Kirk of Illinois, a leader of the moderate Republican Main Street Partnership and a close ally of McCain, said he does not envision internal caucus votes having an impact on a McCain presidency, but he would expect such votes to unify Republicans.

“Votes are a good idea,” Kirk said. “We need to do everything we can to develop a strong agenda on reform.”

Emboldened by their successful May 15 floor revolt, when withholding 132 Republican votes doomed a war-funding amendment (HR 2642), Hensarling and other RSC members said they intend to press for more procedural protests.

No matter what happens with protests, earmarks or the conflict with Boehner, members of the RSC say they expect their faction to gain momentum.

After the last election, while the overall number of House Republicans fell, the RSC became a

majority of the caucus for the first time, with 106 of 199 GOP House members.

And it appears that RSC's clout within the party is likely to continue growing. Republicans are widely expected to lose more seats in November. If that happens, "our share of the caucus will go up," said RSC member Tom Feeney of Florida.